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RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0559
RUEHPG/AMEMBASSY PRAGUE 0116
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NOUAKCHOTT 000235

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SUBJECT: FORMER PRESIDENT HAIDALLAH WEIGHS IN ON THE CRISIS
IN FAVOR OF AZIZ

REF: 08 NOUAKCHOTT 686

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Dennis Hankins for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Former President Haidallah has maintained a low profile after the August 2008 coup. Nevertheless, he expressed clear support for the upcoming June 6 elections, and tacit support for General Aziz. He characterized the FNDD's position as "illogical," and by extension, the USG position. Haidallah values stability above all else, even if it means "true" democracy free from political machinations and military interference remains on hold. End summary.

¶2. (C) PolAsst met March 30 with retired Colonel and former President Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidallah to gain the perspective of a (once) powerful Mauritanian. Haidallah was President of Mauritania from 1980 until 1984, when he was overthrown by Colonel Maaouiya Ould Taya. Released by Taya after spending several years in detention, Haidallah stayed out of politics until reemerging on the political scene to run for president in the 2003 presidential elections against Taya. Alleging election fraud by Taya, he was arrested and detained again. After the 2005 coup led by Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, Haidallah's fortunes improved -- he was released and allowed to reenter politics. Nevertheless, he fared poorly in the 2007 presidential elections, garnering only 1.73% of the vote.

¶3. (C) The current situation: Haidallah began by offering his views on the current political scene. He characterized the FNDD position as "illogical" due to their insistence on the return of President Abdallahi. Haidallah said the August 2008 coup was a "fait accompli," and the FNDD's demands to return Abdallahi to power were unrealistic. Haidallah supported the upcoming June 6 elections, and emphasized that Mauritania needed a "strong leader." When PolAsst asked if this meant someone from the military, Haidallah said "not necessarily." Nevertheless, Haidallah appeared to tacitly support Aziz (and his advisor confirmed this to PolAsst after the meeting). When asked if he would stand as a candidate himself, Haidallah hesitated and clearly did not seem taken with the idea; given his past performances in elections, another run seems unlikely. Haidallah stated, however, that the upcoming "June 6 elections will be better than those in 2007" because there won't be any "manipulation" of candidates by the military (presumably because Aziz doesn't need to

bother this time with having a civilian candidate in front of him).

14. (C) President Abdallahi: According to Haidallah, Abdallahi wasn't really "democratically elected"; he was the chosen candidate of the military, received support from them, and everyone was aware of this. Abdallahi was chosen because (1) his wife was in the Ould Bousbaa tribe (the tribe of General Aziz and Vall), and therefore susceptible to influence, and (2) he was a sufficiently malleable civilian figurehead to fill the presidency until Vall could return to run for president in the 2012 elections. "The democracy of the West is not what we had here in Mauritania under Abdallahi," Haidallah said. From "Taya to Vall to Abdallahi there has been no change" in the political system, Haidallah asserted. To stress the point, Haidallah pointed out that many former Taya supporters and confidants are now in the anti-coup FNDD, singling out Ahmed Ould Sidi Baba as a prime example of the same actors appearing again and again.

15. (C) Former President Vall: Haidallah did not mince words about Vall. Labeling him "corrupt" as a result of his more than 20 years as head of the DGSN, Haidallah could not understand how Vall enjoyed such popularity and a reputation as the "father of Mauritanian democracy" among the international community, particularly the West. It was clear, Haidallah said, that Vall had planned to return as president in 2012 after Abdallahi's term was over. When asked if he thought Vall would run in the upcoming elections, Haidallah confirmed he had heard rumors of Vall running as a

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type of "umbrella" candidate for the opposition groups, but noted that such a candidacy made no sense from a tribal standpoint. It was "inconceivable" that Vall would run as president if Aziz was also running, given that they come from the same tribe and are cousins.

16. (C) Interest in USG position: Haidallah was particularly interested in the USG position towards the ruling junta and Mauritania in general. He could not understand why the US did not support the upcoming elections. If the elections were free and transparent, he reasoned, and Aziz won as a civilian, didn't that mean there was no more junta, and the problem was solved? PolAsst replied that Aziz's unilateral organization of the elections cast a shadow over the entire process, and completely excluded the constitutionally legal president currently under police surveillance in Lemden. Furthermore, though Aziz would nominally be a "civilian," he would surely retain vast influence over the military and security services. Haidallah then asked if the "freezing" of relations with Israel had worsened US relations with the regime. PolAsst replied that relations were already "frosty" between the junta and USG, but kicking out the Israelis certainly hadn't improved the situation. Finally, Haidallah pointed out that the US at one time had been a strong supporter of Taya, who also came to power through a coup (against Haidallah). Therefore, what's to say the US won't eventually come to accept Aziz? PolAsst noted that there had been no change or softening in the strong US position since the coup. Furthermore, this situation was different -- Taya was one in a long series of military rulers coming to power through a coup. Abdallahi, however, had been freely elected and had received a constitutional mandate. Aziz had negated that mandate by seizing power, and continued to rig the system in his favor.

17. (C) Personal vendetta: Haidallah inquired about the supposed personal animosity between Ambassador Boulware and Aziz, and this enmity being the real cause of the USG strong anti-coup stance (Reftel). PolAsst explained that the USG position was based on principles and a desire to see constitutional order restored, not due to any supposed personal disagreements or personality clashes. (Note: This has been a recurring rumor among the press and diplomatic circles. According to the rumor, Ambassador Boulware and

General Aziz were holding a meeting in French at the Presidential Palace when Aziz whispered to an aide in Arabic that he had "had enough of this dog" and wanted to end the meeting. Depending on the story, either Ambassador Boulware responded back in Arabic, saying "I understood what you just said," or a translator told him after the meeting what Aziz had said. Either way, the story has taken hold, refuses to die, and is often cited by coup supporters as the REAL reason for the USG's "unreasonable" position regarding the coup. End note.)

18. (C) Comment: As a member of the exclusive (yet ever-growing) club of Mauritanian leaders ousted by a coup, Haidallah was fully plugged in and aware of all the political machinations going on behind the scenes, from Taya to Aziz. Despite the political instability all of this intrigue causes, stability is first and foremost for Haidallah, and in his mind, a strongman is the only way to secure that stability. Given his past as a military ruler, such a position is not surprising.

19. (C) Comment continued: Like another former Mauritanian head of state (Vall), Haidallah is rumored to have profited from the drug trade. (His son is currently imprisoned in Morocco after being arrested in July 2007 for drug trafficking.) While PolAsst did not ask Haidallah directly about the drug trade, he observed that Haidallah's new house (he recently moved) occupies a prime spot of real estate in Nouakchott. The reception room was lavishly furnished, and much construction work was going on around the house. Whether or not the source for this visible wealth is connected to the drug trade is unknown, but it seems unlikely Haidallah would have been able to amass the funds for such

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projects through entirely legal means. End comment.
HANKINS